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Retooling anthropology: A response to Hart/Ortiz and Gudeman (AT24[6])

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the quotidian and professional performative contexts that encourage the self-interested behaviours that most economists regard *ipso facto* as human nature are left intact. ●

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RETOOLING ANTHROPOLOGY

A response to Hart/Ortiz and Gudeman (AT24[6])

Keith Hart, Horacio Ortiz and Steven Gudeman make provocative suggestions for retooling the analytical apparatus of anthropology as we all get caught up in various ways – intellectual and personal – in the current moment. We share Hart and Ortiz's pedagogical impulse to send us all back to reading Polanyi and Mauss. And we appreciate Gudeman's tracking of inequality and spheres of exchange. Yet we have also begun to appreciate just how much is lacking in our field's ability to make sense of the crisis we are all living through. Anthropology has a lot to contribute to thoughts about the current moment, but may need to re-equip itself by studying mainstream economics, the field in which our new 'natives' have been schooled.

Gudeman has an MBA and Ortiz has in-depth research experience in the world of banking. However, most of us have an oversimplified view of what economists and specialists in the world of finance believe in, leaving us with insufficient analytic and technical tools to make sense of what is going on. Using anthropology's signature method to document what is happening at the micro-level, informed by a higher level of knowledge about the history and meaning of the concepts and tools at work in the world of finance, might afford new insights and suggest other avenues for research. These might, in Michel Callon's terms, involve research among those 'economists in the wild' who are making 'economic' decisions and theories every day outside of economics' formal location in the academy, from the soup kitchens feeding newly hungry families to the chambers of the Senate Finance Committee. We imagine anthropologists fanning out and doing very traditional ethnographic work of the kind that has fallen out of fashion in the profession. We need to do a Roosevelt-style WPA project. We could be sending out students to follow the lives of people in our communities who are losing their homes to foreclosure, who are being fired, who cannot pay the bills, who cannot retire, and who are seeing a complete change of their lives and horizons in a very short space of time. We could be doing ethnographies of loans, and tracking the journey of a loan – where it went, what it turned into, and who was affected along the way.

We need to be thinking about why the current moment is still, by and large, being experienced as a series of personal tragedies (how many exchanged details of losses from their retirement accounts at the recent AAA meetings? How many of us face bankruptcy and foreclosure as political issues?), while in the 1930s and 40s they were felt as part of a broad social experience. Marieke de Goede, in her prescient review essay on finance in the *Economic Sociology European Electronic Newsletter*, made the connection between the 1930s and the early 2000s before the 'crisis' was even announced.

Hart, Ortiz and Gudeman provide excellent suggestions for an anthropology of this crisis. Can we trace the loans and the relationships undergirding them in the way we have done in studying everything from Melanesian *kula* to Egyptian microcredit and Nigerian informal economies? What would such analysis offer? First, it would afford another modality of engagement with our informants and our audience, current and potential. It would allow us to learn the languages and the practices of the people in the financial and banking sectors who are desperately trying to keep their own jobs while they travel around the world assigning value to things, relationships and contracts and deciding who gets foreclosed, fired, furloughed and who does not. It would contribute to a deeper understanding of the regulatory policy issues, too, as Douglas Holmes has been suggesting for some time in his work on and with central bankers.

It is not clear to us that the Washington Consensus is defunct, or that endings and beginnings are so easily definable anymore. Deregulation marched on in areas of policy kept under wraps by officials in the waning weeks of the Bush administration. At the same time, elements of a new Keynesianism seem to be emerging. Our analytical vocabularies are inadequate to capture this. We need a return to practice, alongside the practitioners who have been thrown into this situation with little to fall back on. The ideological questions should be put aside as we delve into practices that people are using regardless of ideology to do basic, yet for anthropologists and many others, still opaque tasks like assigning value to things and figuring out just what, exactly, has happened in recent months. The winks of financial micropractices speak to the epistemologies swirling chaotically around finance and everyday life.

What can anthropologists do? Read Robin Blackburn in *New Left Review*, Nouriel Roubini on RGE Global Monitor, the excellent research of the Corner House UK, the last issue of ANTHROPOLOGY TODAY. Make your students study the history of economic thought, political economy and – please forgive us – neoclassical economics.

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SPRINGING A LEAK

A comment on the Human Terrain Team handbook

On 11 December 2008, an electronic copy of the US Army's Human Terrain Team (HTT) handbook was posted at Wikileaks, an online archive containing thousands of anonymously leaked documents.[1] The 122-page handbook – though labelled 'unclassified' – was previously unavailable to the public. It surfaced only hours after the journal *Nature* published a scathing editorial calling for the end of the Human Terrain System, following a series of scandals in the programme.[2]

Much of the document consists of general guidelines for HTTs operating in Iraq and Afghanistan. It reviews teams' responsibilities, interview techniques, and 'how to effectively brief' commanders. The handbook also confirms accounts about the everyday workings of HTTs: teams accompany units on patrols to gather census data, to uncover kinship, religious and political networks, and to 'collect a great deal of unintended information' (pp. 5-6); they are 'attached to the unit and belong to the Commander, who employs the team as he needs them' (p. 28); they use the 'MAP-HT toolkit' software 'to capture, consolidate, tag, and ingest human terrain data' (p. 34); and they undertake 'cultural preparation' of the battlefield, following 'the same doctrinal principles and four-step methodology of traditional IPB [Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield]' (pp. 49-50). The efforts of HTTs should at all times be 'OPERATIONALLY RELEVANT' to commanders (p. 61).

The handbook is filled with glaring omissions. For example, there is no mention whatsoever of BAE Systems, the corporation that has been granted the lucrative contract for managing the programme (and training HTT members) since its inception in 2006. Nor is there any guidance about how team members might reconcile conflicting obligations to their employer (BAE Systems), US Army commanders, and Iraqi and Afghan research subjects. In conducting interviews for my forthcoming book (González 2009), former employees of the Human Terrain programme told me that such conflicting obligations were leading to disastrous situations.

The handbook avoids discussing dilemmas that team members might face in wartime. What should HTT social scientists who 'belong to the Commander' do if the commander requests field notes or targeting information in preparation for an attack? Are HTT members obliged to identify Iraqis or Afghans suspected of having ties to 'threat organizations' (p. 37)? How is it possible for team members to obtain voluntary informed consent from research participants if HTTs are attached to armed units conducting door-to-door patrols? Such omissions are deeply troubling. As David Price (2008) notes, 'the handbook makes [only] fleeting suggestions that issues of research ethics are being dealt with by someone or something else […] I remain skeptical that this has in fact been implemented in any meaningful way.'